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BY

STANSBURY HAGAR

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WHAT WAS THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM?

STANSBURY HAGAR.

What was the Star of Bethlehem? Must we accept the popular view that it was a miraculous light which first appeared in the heavens at the moment of Christ's birth, advanced before the Magii as they journeyed to his cradle, stood still above that sacred spot and then disappeared forever? Whatever may be its meaning certainly no other story of the heavens has aroused such interest in Christendom and, therefore, none so much requires explanation. Even many to whom the miraculous has lost its appeal seem to cling to this star story, more or less unconscious of its supernatural elements, perhaps because of its poetic beauty. But to those who seek the real significance of the star the writer wishes to present a novel interpretation which he hopes will not be found lacking in idealic beauty and grandeur. This interpretation is not associated with any system of theology, although it will be shown that it can itself be explained, as the reader prefers, in accord with orthodoxy, liberal religion or scepticism. Whatever viewpoint be adopted the result will not accord with the Sunday school scholar's definition of an allegory as a heavenly story with no earthly meaning. And if the reader will recognize that the value and truth of the teachings of a great Master of spiritual law are independent of the literal truth of the incidents attached to his life, nothing herein will antagonize him or her.

The interpretation is based upon astronomy, not the modern scientific astronomy of the telescope, spectroscope and camera, but the astronomy of the period of naked eye observation when every camel driver of the desert caravans and every shepherd in the fields watched in awe the mysterious lights of the night sky and the priests studied the heavens in ceaseless search for every secret that the unaided eye could reach. And then the imagination of the Orient took the knowledge thus acquired and wove it into poetic legends of the sky, true in basic meaning but veiled in imagery. It is this poetic symbolism of astronomy which we must seek to understand, a symbolism elementary in the Oriental mind but foreign to the modern Occidental habit of thought. We have interpreted the Star of Bethlehem literally in harmony with our viewpoint; really to understand it we must interpret it from the viewpoint of the time and place to which it refers.

Early paintings in European cathedrals depict the Lord in the act of hanging out the sun, moon and stars upon the sky with his own hands and this was the literal belief of the time.* In this naive stage of thought the miracles connected with the Star of Bethlehem were naturally accepted without question. But when the rise of modern science put an end to the age of signs and wonders in the heavens and established the omnipresent and omni-temporal reign of natural law, supernatural explanations ceased to be acceptable to the progressive intelligence of the race. Numerous attempts were then made to place the Star of Bethlehem upon a purely rational basis. The supernatural was discarded in favor of some natural but unusual phenomenon occurring only at the time of the Nativity or recurring only after a long or irregular interval. The star became a comet, meteor, meteor shower, northern lights, a planet in some conspicuous position, conjunction of planets, a dream of the Magi.† Any one of these phenomena and numerous other conspicuous celestial apparitions might have occurred at or near the required time, but it is not certain that they did occur then and if they did no satisfactory evidence connects them with the Star of Bethlehem. Again if they did occur there should have been no difficulty in describing them definitely.

The truth is that the seed whence grew the Star of Bethlehem was planted away back in prehistoric times in the soil of the first primitive attempts to determine a date by means of the celestial clock upon the face of which the stars served as hands. To understand the nature of the fruit therefore, we must study its growth from the beginning, paying attention first to primitive time measures, then to their development into the elaborate systems in vogue in the countries in and around Palestine near the beginning of the Christian era. We should then compare certain features of these systems with certain elements of the Star of Bethlehem story in order to determine whether or not the latter may be traced back to a common origin and significance.

How many of us have thought of the great influence that the measurements of time and the seasons, and later the determination of a date, has had upon the development of the human mind? Primitive man used no time measure. He ate whenever he could obtain food, slept whenever sleep came upon him, paid no attention to the seasons and perhaps little even to the recurrence of day and night. Therefore, he provided against neither the heat of noon nor the cold of night, nor stored up food or clothing against the winter. He suffered accordingly, until this very suffering, his most primitive teacher, furnished the

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* A. D. White. New Chapters in the Warfare of Science, Vol. I. p. 1.

† See Hans Herman Keitzinger. Der Stern des Weisen.

stimulus that led him to foresee and provide against its recurrence. At first it sufficed him to know that night follows day and winter follows summer in an unending round; but by and by he wished for more definite information as to particular seasons. Among the first time measures, the hunter wished to learn the most favorable season for seeking his prey. He found nothing on earth that could help him obtain this knowledge with sufficient accuracy. Then he looked above at the starry heavens, and sought there for aid. First he noted that the star groupings are unchangeable, and that certain groups return to the same position in the sky with the return of a certain season; and among them, one of the most remarkable groups occupied a conspicuous position just at the best hunting season. In this way he came to connect these stars with hunters and hunting, and thus the group became the stars of the hunter all over the world, wherever a similar climate prevailed. Since they were always associated with the hunt, the hunter began to attribute to them power over the game, to bring it to him or to warn it away; and so he sought to propitiate these stars by various offerings and by dances held during the hunting season, in which the dancer explained to the stars by his movements that he wished their aid in discovering and overtaking the game; and then, by a curious inversion, to account for this ritual it came to be thought that there was a giant hunter in those stars who would aid human hunters if they appealed to him. Numerous tales were invented about his power and mighty prowess. Thus the legends of Orion, the celestial hunter come down to us from primitive sources, lost in distant antiquity. Thus was the celestial clock discovered, and thus arose celestial ritual and myth, world-wide in distribution; but it all began with the attempt to determine a season.

Another step forward, and the star group is followed in its varying positions throughout the year, so that it marks four seasons instead of one. An interesting example of this still primitive time measure is found among nearly all the Indian tribes of the United States east of the Mississippi. A group of stars in our constellation of the Great Bear, with those of the Northern Crown and a few neighboring stars in other constellations, form the Indian group of the Bear, his Den and the Seven Bird Hunters. The legend tells how the bear comes out of his den in spring, runs across the sky in summer, is overtaken and killed in fall, when the breast of the robin becomes eternally covered with his blood; and the blood which falls upon the trees of earth produces autumn foliage. In winter the bear lies asleep, invisible in his den, to again issue forth in spring and so to repeat the eternal round. Each of the four positions of the bear in the story corresponds accurately

with the position of the stars of the Bear during the early evening in that season only, showing that this group has been used by the Indians as a seasonal time-marker.*

The stars of the Southern Cross were similarly used by the Indians of South America. These rough time measures sufficed for primitive hunters; but when hunting was superseded by agriculture, a more exact method became necessary to determine the proper time for sowing and reaping the crops. Then it was discovered that a certain group of stars, not particularly conspicuous but unique in appearance, occupied such a position in the sky that it rose directly before sunrise, at sowing time, and just after sunset at harvest time. Thus the Pleiades became the time markers in the earliest agricultural year of two seasons. This Pleiades year spread over the entire world, and produced some very important results with which we are directly concerned. Just as Orion became associated with hunters and game, so the Pleiades became the stars of the farmers and the crops; and to them was attributed supreme power over vegetation. They protected the seed when it was deposited in the ground, caused it to germinate and grow, brought the nourishing rains in the proper season, and ever sought to provide an affluent harvest for man. The coast tribes of Peru believed that the Pleiades had created their crops, and they accused their Spanish conquerors of base ingratitude because they failed to worship these most benevolent stars. So, as the stars of the rains and crops, the Pleiades came to be regarded as of all the stars the most beneficent towards man, because they watched over and increased his food supplies. Consequently, there grew up around them the most numerous and elaborate rituals and myths that are associated with any star group. They were the patrons of all sowing and harvest dances and the home of blessed spirits friendly to man. As the stars of spring, the Latin Vergiliae, dominating in past milleniums the vernal morning skies, they ushered in the season of joy and light and life, when all nature wakes from its winter sleep. So pre-eminent became their position in early mythology that they were used as the symbol of the entire starry host of heaven; and all this they owed primarily to their use as markers of time and the seasons.

Another pretty idea became associated with them. Some of our Indian tribes describe the stars as camp-fires burning before the wigwams in the land of the sky; and their flickering is caused by the movement of dancers eternally dancing the ritual dances around them. Very likely this is the primitive idea from which was evolved the conception that the whole celestial revolution is a cosmic procession, a

* Hagar, in "Journal of Am. Folk Lore," Vol. XIII. pp. 92 et seq.

stately religious and ceremonial dance of the stars, marking the eternal rule of peace, law and order throughout the cosmos, and accompanied by celestial music which can be heard by ears attuned to the harmony of the spheres.*

As Lucian writes, "The choral dance of the stars, the orderly concert of the planets, their common music and harmony of motion constitute the exhibition of the Dance of the First Born."† Lucian lived in post-Christian times, but recorded ancient traditions. His "First Born" was probably the sky deity. Callimachus, describing the Grecian form of dance myth, writes that the Pleiades, daughters of the Queen of the Amazons, were the first to institute the circular dance, and the Pannychis or watch night, which probably refers to the determination of a date by observation of the stars.‡

Now this celestial dance was also based on the passage of time even in the primitive epoch; and the Pleiades were pre-eminently the time markers. The Hindus, for example, called them the spinners or weavers of the web of measured time. It is easy to understand, therefore, why they also became the pre-eminent celestial dancers; and if, on some clear night, we watch the twinkling of their closely grouped stars, we

Fig. 1. Pleiades Dance. (Vedder. Boston Public Library.)

shall be convinced that they are indeed dancers, as the Susis of Morocco and our Eastern Indians called them; and then we shall better understand the symbolism of the Pleiades Dance, suggesting the whole

* See R. Brown, Jr. "Euphratean Stellar Researches."

† See J. P. Knight "Sym. Lang. of Anc. Art & Myth, p. 138 note 721.

‡ See J. P. Knight, p. 54, note 186.

cosmic revolution which Vedder has represented for us in his painting in the Boston Public Library; but to the writer, it would seem more appropriate if the beautiful imagery of this cosmic dance of eternal peace and harmony were pictured wholly immersed in the heavens and apart from all material elements, instead of standing on a solid firmament.

Early in primitive times, though probably not till after the constellations had been used to determine the seasons, man observed that the moon and the few stars that moved independently of the starry host always followed the same path among the fixed stars, and that between every full moon and the next, the moon advanced an equal distance along the path in addition to its revolution around the sky. He further observed that after something over twelve such advances, the moon came back to the spot from which it had started, and the seasons repeated themselves in approximately the same period. This gave him the twelve months and the lunar year, practically his first continuous time measure. He divided the stars along the moon's path into twelve constellations, each covering approximately the distance advanced by the moon in a lunar month; and he assigned to these constellations, names based partly upon the configuration of their stars and partly upon their seasonal attributes. So, for example, just as Orion governed the hunting season, and the Pleiades the sowing and harvest seasons, the corresponding constellations of the path became respectively twin hunters and the domestic bull of the fields and pastures. The greater part of these star groups were assigned to animals, and so the band or path in which they were located became known as the zodiac, or zone of animals. Each one of the twelve divisions was called a sign, probably because it served as a marker of time and the lunar progress. Rituals and myths associated themselves with these as with the older constellations in similar manner and with similar purpose.

The sun was not used directly as a time marker until a later period, because his disk is too bright to be gazed at and because he leaves no visible mark like a fixed star to serve as a milestone upon his journey across the sky; but his progress was measured by the movement of the shadows he created, for these could readily be observed, and their advance could be measured upon the surface of the earth. At first the shadows of natural landmarks were used for the purpose. Then artificial objects were erected as shadow casters, and thus appeared first the gnomon, and then the sun dial. Out of the latter were probably evolved our clocks and watches, the hands being substituted for the shadows.

Sir Norman Lockyer and Mr. Penrose have shown that the principal use of many of the most important Egyptian temples was to mark a certain date by means of the rays of the rising or setting sun or of some star that once each year for a few moments only penetrated through the main pylon of the temple and illuminated an altar in the dark Habenben or Holy of Holies at the farther end. The same system was used in Greek temples and in early Christian churches the center aisle was directed to the sunrise point on the day of the saint to whom the edifice was dedicated. This refinement of the gnomon affords further evidence both of the importance attached to the accurate determination of a date, and of the close association of the dates so determined with the religious festivals.

The next step forward in the use of the sun as a time measure concerns us greatly. It was realized that the stars do not actually disappear by day, but are only obscured by the light of the sun. Observation of the zodiacal constellations rising and setting after sunset revealed that these stellar risings and settings advanced through one sign each month. Early students of the sky deduced from these two facts that the sun himself in his apparent journey across the sky travels over the same zodiacal path, followed by the moon and the planets. The power and brilliancy of the sun had from the first ensured his position as the chief divinity of the sky. Hence he was now given the post of honor formerly conceded to the moon as the principal celestial marker of time, and thus the solar zodiac arose. By means of this zodiac any date was fixed by reference to the position of the sun in the zodiac at that time; and this position was determined first by observing the zodiacal stars rising and setting at sunset as above stated, and secondly by noting the whole aspect of the zodiac at midnight, and locating the sun exactly opposite the stars crossing the meridian at that moment. This was the highest and most accurate as well as the final step in the measurement of time and the determination of a date by means of celestial observation with the unaided eye. It had been taken in many parts of the world in prehistoric but not in primitive times. The American Indians and, doubtless, all peoples advanced above savagery, deified not the visible orb of the sun, but the invisible power behind it. Around the sun grew up a wealth of ritual and myth consistent with the importance of his observed influence in lighting and heating the world, in warring against darkness and cold, in bringing the seasons, the rains and the winds. His daily journey across the sky suggested in early times the journey of man through life. Born in the golden east at break of day, he climbs upward in the sky. Clouds war against him on his way; but he overcomes these powers of darkness and passes upward to the zenith of

his power; but there the ascent ends, and thence with waning strength he descends, until old age leads his tottering footsteps into the darkness of the western grave. The powers of darkness have conquered again, and the sky is red with the blood of the murdered god of light. But he will come again in glory, triumphant over darkness and the grave.

Such is the story of the solar myth found in all times and in all parts of the world, and varying but little whenever or wherever found. It was applied also to the annual solar journey. Born as a feeble infant at the winter solstice at the southernmost point of his course, he increases in strength and stature as he advances northward, till at the vernal equinox the days become longer than the nights, light has triumphed over darkness, the Lord of good has overcome the powers of evil and has brought back again the season of light and life. Still he advances northward, increasing in strength till at the summer solstice he attains the height of his power in the northern hemisphere. In the myths this point is marked by miraculous evidence of his supreme strength and power; but now the southward course begins again, and at the autumnal equinox the nights again become longer than the days and the powers of darkness conquer and slay the god of light. Four great festivals mark these four epochs of the solar round—that of birth at the beginning of winter, that of the triumph of light and life at the beginning of spring, that of greatest power at the beginning of summer and that of death at the beginning of autumn. They have reached us as Christmas four days after the winter solstice, Easter determined by the date of the vernal equinox, St. John's Day four days after the summer solstice and the three days festival of death, Hallow Een, All Saints and All Souls. True the last festival is now observed a month later than the autumnal equinox, possibly because it was so closely connected with the death symbolism of the zodiacal constellation of the Scorpion, that it remained attached to this asterism instead of following the sun when the movement of precession had carried the Scorpion back from the equinox. But we need not follow this side track farther.

We have now traced an outline of the early primitive time measures and their development into more elaborate methods, we have seen the increasing importance attached to the determination of a date in later times evidenced by the increasing complexity and accuracy of method an the increasing effort associated with it, and we may have observed and increasing intimacy between the use of the time measures and the religious festivals connected with them. Let us now step forward to the centuries immediately preceding the beginning of our era. Let us limit our field principally to the countries of Egypt, Asia Minor and Greece, which intimately influenced the writers of the New Testament,

and, confining our attention to the festival of birth in those times and regions, let us note into what the determination of a date and the symbolism connected with it had developed with the advance of civilization.

We are concerned first with the famous temple of the goddess Hathor at Denderah in Egypt. The tradition connected with this temple, whether true or not, is a veritable romance of astronomy. About 4200 B. C. the astronomer, architect and King, Khufu, who built the Great Pyramid, is said to have mastered the movements of the heavens and

FIG. 2. PLANISPHERE OF DENDERAH.

to have ascertained that the precession of the equinoxes would bring a certain bright star into close proximity to the northern pole 800 years after his time. He thereupon selected a spot upon which he determined that a temple should be built when the star approached the pole. He planned the temple in detail and deposited the plans in a secret crypt. The cornerstone was to be laid at midnight upon the night of the summer solstice, thus marking the date of the birth of the Egyptian

year. At the appointed time eight centuries later the plans were exhumed by King Pepi who verified the position of the polar star and erected the temple as directed. This was the first temple of Hathor at Denderah. The edifice was altered and extended about 1500 B. C. and was rebuilt again later, being completed in its present form probably during the first century B. C. Denderah is a corruption of Tanterer, Place of the Orbit or Zodiac, and two of the best known zodiacs of antiquity were placed within it, though they were more properly called planispheres because they included other than zodiacal constellations. The name of the goddess Hathor is translated Habitation of Horus, the Divine Light, her son. To him under the name Har-sem-te-we, Horus of the Two Horizons, and to her the temple was jointly dedicated. She was known as Queen of Heaven, Celestial Virgin, Mother of God. It is evident that in early times she was associated with the bright star shining at the pole but evidently, after precession had carried that star away from the pole again, she was transferred to the Virgin of the Zodiac. On the circular planisphere of Denderah we perceive her in that position in the zodiacal sequence, seated in a chair and holding her divine child upon her lap. The third Egyptian month of Shait, roughly corresponding with our September, was dedicated to her.* During this month two milleniums ago the sun was actually passing through the constellation Virgo.

Annually at midnight on June 21 the festival of the foundation of the temple and of the birth of the new year was repeated. This date marked also the birth of Hathor and of Horus. How was it determined? We know at least that then Spica, the bright star of the Virgin, was setting upon the western horizon just before midnight. That star had been figured in many times and places as the divine celestial mother with the divine child in her arms. The image of Hathor was then carried to the roof of the temple there to hold communion with her divine father Ra, the sun god, at the same time that the celestial Virgin was supposed to join the sun in the west. Upon the temple walls Hathor is depicted as the Virgin Mother with the rays of the divine splendor streaming from the circle of her womb and the names of the temple halls and chambers farther indicate their association with a divine birth. Its chief hall is that of the Child in His Cradle, apparently also called the Chapel of the New Year. Around it are the Halls of Birth, Golden Rays, Gold and Frankincense and Incense and the planisphere adds to these hieroglyphs signifying Chamber of Holy Adoration and Palace Chamber of Supreme Light. From this symbolism we may justifiably surmise that the night of the great festival of birth was

* See Maspero, Dawn of Civilization, p. 208.

known as the Holy Night. We know that it was called the Night of the Child in his Cradle.* True this festival seems to invert the solar symbolism by its connection with the summer solstice instead of the winter solstice, but the explanation is quite simple. In rainless Egypt agriculture and life itself depended upon the annual inundation of the Nile so that there the normal solar seasons were of slight significance and the natural year began, not with the return of the sun but with the beginning of the rise of the river. This rise reached lower Egypt at about the summer solstice, consequently the Egyptians began their year then and assighed to that date the symbolism of solar birth. The circular planisphere of Denderah was placed within a chamber upon the roof of the Hathor temple, where the priests in quiet and solitude could at any time readily compare its figures with the aspect of the sky. The upper half of the planisphere depicts the zodiac from Libra to Pisces inclusive—exactly the aspect of the summer solstice midnight two milleniums ago. Doubtless the priests memorized this aspect of the planisphere and then determined the date of the birth festival by watching the advance of the zodiacal constellations until the celestial aspect corresponded with that of the planisphere. Thus the stars verified the sacred date for them just as the pole star had verified it for Pepi three milleniums earlier. And as they watched the stars pass on, each to occupy its destined place in the celestial plan, we can understand why they called the temple the Seat of the Heavenly Dances in the Six Heights of Osiris. The writer of the Book of the Master† gives an eloquent description of the scene at the foundation of the temple. He asks us to picture the monarch keeping watch from midnight to midnight upon the sacred design of the heavens. "Then every portion of the celestial surface before him will be divided into groups of stars or constellations corresponding to the sacred images depicted upon the planisphere, and consequently with the various chambers of the temple to which those images themselves correspond. Thus the whole field of the watcher's view would be marked out with precision into well-defined groups or constellations, each represented by its distinctive symbol, immediately recognizable by those, and those alone, who should understand the nature of the temple plan and should be acquainted with the temple structure. And as each midsummer came round, opening a fresh Egyptian year, the hosts of highest heaven gathered around the 'Child in his Cradle', and the festival of the starry universe was fitly celebrated in the temple of Hathor, the Mother of God, herself the 'Habitation' of the holy Light.

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* Denderah. Mariette Pacha tome 1. pp. 189, 190.
Wm. M. Adams, The Book of the Master pp. 75, 76.

† W. M. Adams, London 1898.

"Deeply solemn must have been the scene surrounding the Grand Master, Pepi, on that memorable night when, obedient to the star given command of his long-departed predecessor, he stood and measured the earth. Every feature, every detail, every ornament, speaks with a silent eloquence which echoes through space and time. There lay before the monarch the archaic design, traced out in characters telling of an age already bygone, and, itself new risen from the tomb, giving expression to the eternal destiny of man beyond the grave. In his hand was the Royal 'Khus,' the masonic rule of ancient Egypt. Upon his head sparkled the luminous tiara of Hathor, figuring forth the supernal beauty wherewith the Illuminate should be crowned in the day of immortality. Far in the northern horizon the pole-star shone before his feet, proclaiming the advent of the long-appointed hour. All round, throughout the immensity of the illimitable vault, burned amid the profound stillness of the night the countless multitudes of infinitely distant suns, recalling the sublime passage in the Book of the Master: 'I make the shining circles of the years: and billions are my measurement.' Upward from out the darkling depths of the unfathomable abyss, stretching like boundless wings on either hand, and high aloft by the zenith of the translucent dome, rose, invisible to the common eye but present ever to the mind of the astronomer, the plane of our planet's orbit,—that celestial plane of man's earthly course,—girt by the zodiac, like an azure belt of gleaming gems,

> "Those lights most lustrous of the firmament
> Which through the heaven lead the gliding Year."

Then when the circuit was accomplished, and the surface of the heaven grouped into constellations according to the sacred plan, the monarch gave the signal for laying the foundation of the temple, and, fixing his eyes upon the northern centre of the revolving heaven, commanded the attendant ministers to stretch out the measuring cord in the predetermined direction, which he as Grand Master, and he alone, foreknew."

In the Book of the Dead the soul following the course of the sun exclaims: "I come daily through the house of the god in Lion form and I pass forth from it to the house of Isis, the Mighty, that I may see glorious, mysterious and hidden matters even as she has caused me to see the divine offspring of the Great One."* Recalling the Lion, and the Isis (or Hathor) and Horus of the circular planisphere, this passage seems also to refer to the signs Leo and Virgo with the sun god of the new year located in the latter. The determination of time has now taken a long step forward. It has been surrounded by an

* Renouf, Book of the Dead, chap. 78 in Pro. So of Bib. Arch., vol. XVI, p. 103.

elaborate, refined and beautiful ritual and myth interwoven with the arcana of religion and aided by an actual picture of the sky at the critical moment.

The festival of the Virgin Mother and of the Divine Child in His Cradle was not confined to Denderah. It was celebrated at Alexandria and in the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greece at midnight on December 25 in the centuries preceding and following the rise of Christianity. We have a vase painting of the child Liknites exposed to the gaze of the initiates in his mystic cradle or liknon at the festival called Liknophoria. The torches carried by his two attendants signify the night, and the curtain behind him the secrecy of the mysteries. The liknon

FIG. 3. THE LIKNOPHORIA RITUAL. J. E. HARRISON.

was a shovel shaped basket used also to carry fruit. Plutarch writes that the Hosioi performed a secret sacrifice in the sacred precinct of Apollo, the sun god, when the Thyiades women raise up Liknites, the Child in the Cradle. This child deity was identified with Dionysus who was slain, dismembered and then reborn, also with the newborn fruits of the earth as well as with the holy child Brimos, the ear of grain reaped The ceremony of awaking him was connected with solar rebirth and was a mimetic summons to the earth to bring forth her fruits in due season. A fresh ear of grain recently reaped was shown to the epoptae at Eleusis by night as the supreme revelation and the announcement was made to them: "Holy Brimo has borne a sacred child, Brimos." Brimo is the name of a cereal drink, also a form of

the Divine Mother.* We can hardly avoid seeing in these cereal symbols the star Spica, the Sheaf of Wheat, the Celestial Mother, who rose on the eastern horizon exactly at midnight on December 25 and whose rising announced the rebirth of the sun of the new year, lying in his celestial cradle in the zodiac. At Christmas time in the early centuries of our era and probably before, both the Greeks and Saracens celebrated a festival called that of Increasing Light. They ended it at midnight, going into the inmost shrine, whence coming forth they cried, "A virgin hath brought forth a child, the light is about to grow again."† Elsewhere Epiphanius describes in the following words a similar or perhaps identical festival held in the temple of Kore, the celestial Virgin at Alexandria: Having kept watch during the whole night, chanting to the image (of the goddess) with songs and flutes and having brought the night festival to an end with the crowning of the cocks, the torch bearers descend into a subterranean shrine and bring forth a wooden statue (of the goddess) seated in a sedan chair and having cruciform symbols marked upon her brow, hands and knees. They carried this statue seven times around the midmost temple and then returned it to its subterranean shrine.‡ Let us observe that this Christmas, birth festival of Increasing Light, evidently refers to the birth of the sun of the new year. And the announcement of the virgin birth at the climax of the ritual is made as exactly as possible at the moment when the celestial Virgin with the Divine Child in her arms rises in the east, a remarkable coincidence if it be such. The nocturnal rites imply the presence of star worship. The "inmost shrine" will suggest the "holy of holies" of the Egyptian temples. In this ritual did not the participants enter the inmost shrine to observe the rising of Spica and having observed it, did they not then announce the virgin birth of the sun of the new year, and having done this did they not carry in procession the image of the celestial virgin Kore in imitation of the passage of Virgo across the sky from the darkness in the east to the darkness in the west?

The cult of the sun god Mithra presents another interesting aspect of the birth festival. This cult is supposed to have originated among the Aryans in or near Persia prior to their separation from the Hindu stock. It became closely related with the cult of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman and the religion of Zoroaster of which the Magi are supposed to have been priests. Spreading westward the Roman soldiers came in contact with it in their oriental campaigns.

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* Plutarch, De Isis et Osiris, 35; J. E. Harrison, Prolegomena pp. 402, 519, 525, 548-552; Lenormont, Beginnings of History p. 263.

† Epiphanius Schol. Gregor. Bodley 43. Lobeck, Aglaophamus II, 1227, note z.

‡ Epiphanius, Dindorf Ed. 11, 483.

Mithra was then known as the invincible god, a title which naturally appealed to them. He became the god of the Roman armies and his cult was quickly spread by them throughout the Empire in the centuries preceding Christianity. It seems indeed strange that so little popular recognition is given to the fact that in the first centuries of our era it had become the dominant religion of the Empire and the principal opponent of Christianity. Thereafter it gradually disappeared before the advance of its younger rival.

The relations between Christianity and Mithraism are most remarkable and mysterious. They have never been satisfactorily explained. Though hostile, many of their most important tenets were held in common so that, from the viewpoint of any other religion, they seem almost like divergent branches of one cult. For example, Mithraism is said to have shared every sacred and fundamental dogma of Christianity and again Tertullian, Jerome and other early fathers of the church assert that Mithraic mysteries were celebrated in the cave in which Christ was born at Bethlehem, "the city of the house of the sun."* Yet there were marked divergences at least exoterically. The basis of Mithraism was frankly symbolic, astronomic and calendric. In his most usual aspect on the monuments Mithra is figured in a cave mounted upon and slaying a bull while animals below lap the blood that flows from the wounds. On opposite sides of the scene stand two heralds with an upright and an inverted torch respectively. In the corner overhead the sun and moon are represented by two smaller human heads with a halo and a crescent while the signs of the zodiac are arched above the head of the deity. Astronomically the scene undoubtedly represents the sun in the zodiacal sign of the Bull bringing the spring rains and nourishing the crops on which the animals feed. The scorpion directly beneath the bull represents the sign Scorpio in opposition to the sun and demonstrates the basic significance of the picture as reproducing the aspect of the sky at the joyous moment of the vernal equinox. Sometimes two trees further confirm this interpretation, the vernal leaf bearing tree with the bull's head attached being placed opposite the autumnal fruit bearing tree to which a scorpion clings. The heralds typify the morning and evening stars, day and night, summer and winter and in general the alternations of day and night and of the seasons and the passage of time. But who can study the calm serenity of the face of Mithra as sculptured on the bas relief at Petrograd for example, or the passion of the face of the so-called Dying Alexander, now believed to be Mithraic, without perceiving

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* Dupuis Origins de tous les cultes Tome III, p. 51 ed 4 to Higgins' Anakalypsis, Vol. II, p. 99.

the probability in the whole setting of the scene that behind the seasonal and astronomic symbolism we have a picture of the struggle and triumph of the spiritual self over the physical.

The real name of Mithra, the mediator between God and man, the light that lightest every man that comes into the world, was probably not given except to the initiates of his cult. On the Mithraic monuments we see tablets left blank for the sacred name which is never revealed and then we may wonder if this is the unknown god, the nameless deity of Paul's Athenian inscription. But that is improbable for few Mithraic inscriptions have been found in Greece.

We know little of the myths describing the life of Mithra because apparently they were taught only by word of mouth and in the mysteries, but we can piece together parts of his life story from representations on the monuments. This has been ably done by Professor Franz Cumont. Thus we learn that Mithra was miraculously born from a rock on the banks of a river and under the shade of a sacred tree. Shepherds alone ensconced upon a neighboring mountain where they were tending their flocks, had witnessed the miracle of his entrance into the world and they had drawn near to worship him and to present the first fruits of their flocks and their harvests.* The scene becomes more interesting to us when we learn that the birthday of Mithra was celebrated on December 25 and it attains a climax when we study it as depicted upon certain Mithraic cameos. On the principal face of one of these Mithra is figured in the center rising from the rock. Over

Fig. 4. Mithraic Cameo. Walsh.

his head are the two stars, Castor and Pollux. Beside him on opposite sides the Dioscuri appear as two crowned kings mounted upon horseback and accompanied by attendants. They have come to worship and have raised their arms in adoration before the new born deity, who himself adores the heavens. It is worthy of note that the heads of the

* Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, pp. 131: 132.

Magian order were always represented as kings, this being an honorary title like the English king at arms.* Two prostrate human figures under the horses may suggest death in contrast with resurrection symbolized by Mithra himself. We know that skeletons were used in the Mithraic ritual. At the top of the scene are the sun and moon and the two birds of day and night. In the center between the sun and moon the eagle holding a serpent in his mouth represents the constellations of Aquila and Serpens, directly opposite Castor and Pollux in the sky. On the left of the lowest line of figures, appearing from behind the mountain of the east, the bread and cup of the Mithraic communion stand for the constellation Crater, the Cup. We are left in no doubt as to the significance of these constellation figures. They are so placed relatively as to reproduce the aspect of the sky just before midnight on December 25, two thousand years ago when Gemini was on the meridian, Aquila on the inferior meridian and Crater rising on the eastern horizon. A star, probably Procyon, is also figured in correct relative position under the left fore-leg of the horse on our left and a dog occupies the position of the constellation of the Greater Dog in the lower right hand portion. The serpent on our left probably represents Hydra, that on the right possibly Eridanus. At any rate the whole scene is a picture of the sky at or immediately before the moment of the supposed birth of the solar god. We see the time and place of this sacred event marked primarily by the two stars which stand over the generative rock beside the two worshiping kings whose horses evidence that they have come from a distance. This is plainly the Mithraic Nativity and Star of Bethlehem and it is quite possible that the cameo depicts the actual ritual of the festival of birth. It represents a later calendar than that of the Mithraic Bull, so that it must probably be assigned to the later period of Mithraism, possibly post Christian, but whatever its date it is purely Mithraic in character. A similar symbolism is represented upon another cameo.†

We may go much farther afield in both time and place and still find analogies for the story of Bethlehem.

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* Higgins' Anakalypsis, Vol. II, p. 98.

† The first named cameo was originally figured by Walsh, An Essay on Ancient Coins, Medals and Gems, 2nd Edition, London 1830. We have no further information concerning it. Though probably of post Christian date it exhibits no Christian influence. Cumont, our best authority on Mithra, regards it as unquestionably Mithraic, and as referring to the Mithraic birth accompanied by the Dioscuri, the Eucharist and other symbols of the cult. The present writer is responsible for the remainder of the description.

See Cumont, Textes et Monuments Figures Relatifs aux Mysteres de Mithra p. 450. The Mysteries of Mithra pp. 124: 185.

The birth of numerous other deities and personages was announced by a star, for example Yu, founder of the first Chinese dynasty, Lao-tse, inspired sage, Abraham, Aesculapius, Augustus and various other Caesars. According to Jewish legends a star appeared at the birth of Moses and was seen by the Magi of Egypt who informed the king.* In the uranography of ancient China the stars Epsilon, Mu, Nu of Aquarius, through which the sun was actually passing at the time of the winter solstice, were called the House of the Virgin. At this time the asterism presided over the marriage of the principles of light and shade and the union of heaven and earth. The fruit of this marriage was the new light born at the winter solstice apparently a year later. The sign of the celestial Child therefore governed this date and was also known as the Hour or Palace of Generations. So, also, the twelfth moon in January was called the Buds and it was pictured as a newly born infant with its arms raised.†

The Hindu deity Krishna, the good shepherd, was born among shepherds at midnight in December. A chorus of devatas or angels saluted him with divine hymns and a prophet having examined his stars declared him to be of celestial descent and visited his father and mother at Gokul. Soon after his birth he was carried away by night and concealed in a remote regoin for fear of a tyrant, whose destroyer it was foretold he would become and who had, for that reason, ordered all male children born at that period to be slain. This story is the subject of an immense sculpture in a cave at Elephanta the date of which, according to Higgins, is at least several centuries prior to the time of Christ.‡ While some doubt may exist, however, as to the priority of this birth legend and of its freedom from Christian influence there is no question as to the priority of the Budhistic legends. Budha was born at midnight on December 25, of the virgin Maya. When residing in the fourth heaven, astronomic signs and the appearance of a Messianic star announced to him that the time had come for his reincarnation upon earth. His birth was heralded by a supernatural light. Then the Rishis and Devas, the spiritually advanced beings who dwelt upon earth, exclaimed with great joy: "This day Budha is born for the good of men, to dispel the darkness of their ignorance." Then the four heavenly kings took up the strain and the gods of the thirty-three heavens sang: "Today Bodhisatwa is born on earth to give joy and peace to men."¶ At the time of his birth the constellation Pushya

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* A. D. White, A History of the Warfare of Science, Vol. 1, p. 172.

† Schlegel, Uranographie Chinoise, pp. 48, 50, 64.

‡ Higgins, Anakalypsis, Vol. I, pp. 129, 130.

¶ Bunsen, Angel Messiah, pp 25, 33, 35.

(Flower-Cancer) descending, waited in the rear of the other stars.* A Chinese version states that the time of his incarnation was marked by the conjunction of the constellation Kwei ($\gamma\delta\epsilon\theta$ Cancris) with the sun. Ornaments to be presented to him were made when the constellation Chin was setting and Koh (α and ξ Virginis) coming on. As was predicted his mother was on a journey at the time of his birth, and at this time a saint descended from heaven to journey to the child.† Zoroaster is said to have predicted that a sacred personage would issue from the womb of an immaculate virgin and that his coming would be preceded by a brilliant star whose light would guide those who sought him to the place of his birth. Plato said that three Magi came to Socrates at his birth bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh. ‡

Having now observed the analogies between other birth legends and that of Christ, we may take up the third division of the subject, the interpretation of the star of Bethlehem. These questions naturally arise: Can all these analogies be accidental, if not, what is their significance? In nearly all the legends described we have seen clearly that the divine birth referred to was that of the sun god of the new year and that the moment of birth was determined by observation of the night sky, especially of the signs of the zodiac. Such analogies might have little weight for those who regard Christmas as unquestionably the birth day of the historic Christ, but that is so far from proven that even the Catholic Encyclopedia in its article on Christmas admits we do not know the day of the year on which that event took place, nor, it is generally conceded, do we know the year itself. It could not have been the generally accepted date. The years of the taxing for which, as Luke tells us, Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem are inconsistent with that date. The general tendency of modern scholars seems to be to place the birth in the year 4 B. C. because, for an additional reason, Herod the Great is now believed to have died at least four years before the beginning of our era. It is unlikely that Christ was born on December 25, if we accept the literal account, because of the extreme improbability that shepherds would be tending their flocks at night in the open at this season. Why, then, was this date chosen for the legend? Because it marked the festival of the winter solstice when the sun having reached the most distant point in his annual course, turned back again and began to move towards the north. The actual solstice occurs on the 22nd day of December, but for several

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* Sacred Books of the East, Vol. X Sutta Niphata, p. 19.

† The Romantic Legend of Sakya Buddha, Samuel Beal, London, 1875, pp. 32, 56, 64 et seq.

‡ Higgins, Vol. I, p. 96.

days to him who watches the sunrise points upon the horizon, the sun seems hardly to move either north or south. Perhaps for this reason and also in order that there might be time to prepare for the festival after the announcement of the priest-astronomers, that the solstice had arrived, the date was postponed until the 25th. "O how wonderfully acted Providence," writes Cyprian, "that on that day on which the sun was born . . . Christ should be born."*

The fact is that we know that the Christmas date was chosen because it was the birthday of the sun and the early Church, for whatever reason, followed rather than opposed the pagan ritual calendar. So far the analogy holds with the other birth legends. But here it seems to stop. The Star of Bethlehem presents no superficial resemblance to the constellation used to determine the solstice and there is no direct mention of the zodiac or of any other asterism. We have neither the planisphere of Denderah, nor the symbolic ritual of the Liknophoria nor the Mithraic cameo to help us find the key. In fact there is no apparent astronomic element except the solsticial date and the star itself. Must we then consider the Bethlehem story unique and apart from its analogues? Let us consider.

Suppose we first try to see the heavens as they appeared at that Christmas midnight nineteen hundred and eighteen years ago. In spite of the lapse of time, we can still do this, for to our unprofessional eyes the aspect of the heavens does not change from year to year except for the varying positions of the moon and planets, and we are not concerned with them.

So if today we look at the heavens in New York at midnight about January 22nd, or procure a planisphere for latitude 40° North in any book store and set it to the same date, we shall see the heavens almost exactly as they appeared to those shepherds of old who are said to have tended their flocks on the plains of Palestine that Christmastide. The day and the month have changed owing to the precession of the equinoxes, and the nine degrees difference of latitude between New York and Bethlehem adds a slight variation of aspect, but for us nothing else is changed.

Well, then, if we observe the midnight heavens of the Star of Bethlehem, we shall see in the zodiac the constellation of Aries, the Ram, leading the other signs and about to set in the west. Following it comes Taurus, the Bull, with the beautiful cluster of the Pleiades, then Gemini, the Twins, then Cancer, the Crab, upon the meridian, that is at the highest point in the zodiacal arc. Beyond toward the east we

* De pasch. Comp. XIX.

see Leo, the Lion, and finally Virgo, the Virgin, appears with its bright star Spica just rising above the eastern horizon.

Now suppose that the Egyptians, Greeks or Hebrews or any of the Oriental peoples of twenty centuries ago, had wished to describe this aspect of the heavens. They would not use a literal statement of it as we do because their habit of thought delighted in that beauty of metaphor, simile, and allegory with which they clothed all their legends, but especially those of the stars; and again because they reserved literal scientific truth for the instructed few and gave to the public only truth in allegoric form. So we might reasonably expect from what we know of their literature that any description of the heavens would be veiled in poetic imagery, in fact that it would appear in the form of a story, using the star symbols commonly known at that time and place and naturally using them in a sequence corresponding with the positions of the constellations in the sky.

Let us see if such was the case. We found that Aries, the Ram, was the leading constellation in our celestial field. From about 1730 B. C. this asterism was widely known as the Leader of the Host of the Zodiac, supposedly because the sun entered it at the time of the vernal equinox (March 21). Then the agricultural year began with the sowing season. But it is equally possible that the constellation was so called because it led the zodiacal signs in the midnight sky at the time of the winter solstice (December 22).

In the country around the Euphrates River, which, so far as our present knowledge goes, seems to have been the birthplace of astronomy, and from the most ancient times known to history, the star Alpha of Aries was known as the Ram's Eye, the Horn Star and probably the Star of the Flocks, also the Proclaimer of Dawn and the Messenger of Light, the Prince, the Leading One, the Ram that as bell wether led the heavenly flock across the celestial fields. The constellation was the Egyptian Fleece, the Arabian Tame Ram or Sheep, the Greek and Latin Ram that became the Golden Fleece sought by the Argonauts. When the sun entered Aries the Romans celebrated the rites of Pales, the goddess of sheepfolds. In Babylon the asterism was called the ram or ibex and was associated with the ram as the chief object of sacrifice. In China it represented the herdsmen and presided over the pastures of sacrificial animals. The Hindus also called it the Ram. In the very ancient Euphratean epic of Gilgamesh there are twelve tablets, each pertaining to one of the signs of the zodiac. On the Aries tablet the hero is described as the shepherd of Uruk who fed with the rams

and gazelles.* This is enough to indicate the association of Aries with sheep and shepherds in pre-Christian times.

Now let us compare these symbols with what is said of the star of Bethlehem. As every one knows, there are two statements concerning this star, one contained in the second chapter of Matthew, the other in the second chapter of Luke. Beginning at the eighth verse, the latter account reads: "And there were shepherds in the same country, abiding in the field and keeping watch by night over their flock." Those who interpret this chapter literally find difficulty in explaining why either the shepherds or their flocks were in the fields at night during the cold and inclement winter of Palestine and at the height of the rainy season. As a matter of fact we know that it was customary for the Jews to send out their sheep to the pastures in spring and to bring them home at the commencement of the first rains towards the end of October. We can avoid this difficulty if we suppose that we are reading merely a poetic reference to the constellation Aries.

The second constellation is Taurus, the Bull, containing that most famous of star groups, the Pleiades. Three basic ideas seem to dominate the very numerous symbols associated with this group all over the world at many times and places. The first idea is that of a mass or heap of people or things, doubtless due to the brightness and close proximity of these clustering stars. Hence their Babylonian name, the Many Little Ones or the Family Group, the Kimah, Cluster or Heap of Job and of Amos, the Flock of Clusterers of Aratos. The Greek name Pleiades is best described as the plural of πλέως meaning many.

The second idea associated with this group is that of peace, happiness and propitious influence, probably due to their conjunction with the sun at the joyous season of spring, when the cold and barren winter is ending and the fresh vegetation is budding forth under the influence of the returning sun and the rains. Who indeed does not feel within himself the joy of spring?

The third type of symbols pertaining to the Pleiades placed them in the aspect of measures of time. This they owed to their conspicuous position with respect to the sun at seed time and harvest, as the late Robert Grant Haliburton was the first to point out, † and we have also seen why and how they came to represent as dancers the hosts of heaven.

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* See R. Brown, Jr., in Pro. So. of Biblical Arch. XIII, p. 246. Olcott, Star Lore of All Ages, pp. 53, 54; R. H. Allen, Star Names and their Meanings, pp. 75, 80. Schlegel, Uranographie Chinoise p. 337. Subsequent references to names of constellations may be found in Allen and Olcott under the appropriate asterism.

† See his rare work privately printed, New Materials for the History of Man and quotations in Blake's Astronomical Myths.

FIG. 5. CELESTIAL DANCERS AT THE NATIVITY.—BOTTICELLI.

Now, the second episode in Luke's account of the Star of Bethlehem refers to "A multitude of the heavenly host praising God and singing, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men in whom He is well pleased." In this celestial chorus we see all three elements of the Pleiades symbolism—the group, the propitious influence and the singers, dancers and markers of time at the moment of birth. The concept suggests Plato's statement that each planet is accompanied by a siren which adds its note to the general harmony and the planets themselves were so pleased with the sound that they sang divine songs accompanied by the sacred dance; also it recalls the stars of the Old Testament that sang together with joy at the creation. The Old Testament contains numerous allusions to the host of heaven, always referring to the stars, either directly or personified as angels. These are celestial beings surrounding the throne of the god of the heavens who testify by the regularity of their appearance to the rule of law and order throughout the cosmos.* One of these references is quoted in the New Testament.† Can we then question that the stars themselves are the "multitude of the heavenly host" that sing the praise of the God of the cosmos in this account of Luke?

The association of the Angelic Chorus with the circular Pleiades cosmic dance came down into even recent times in the Church, for in the paintings of Botticelli and Fra Angelico we see the chorus represented as a group of girls dancing in a circle in the sky above the scene of the nativity. (Fig. 5).

Castor and Pollux, the two bright stars of Gemini, the next sign, were first identified with the sun and moon, the two wanderers of the sky. They were the Phoenician patrons of commerce who invented the mystic ship.‡ So in Greece they were represented as travelers mounted upon horseback as on the Mithraic cameo. Lenormant and others have shown their connection with two brothers, one of whom slays the other and the survivor founds the first city. But it is noticeable that in each instance of this legend a journey is included. Thus, Cain journeys after the fratricide and becomes "wandering and fugitive upon the face of the earth," until he settles in the land of Nod. The river Tiber bore Romulus and Remus to Rome before the founding of the city, and on the Gemini tablet of the epic of Gilgamesh Eabani decides to journey to Uruk to the court of Gilgamesh. Again the mythical journey of Mithras follows an episode pertaining to Taurus.¶ The Chaldean

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* See James Hastings, Dict. of the Bible, Host of Heaven.

† Acts 7:42.

‡ J. P. Knight, Symbolical Language, p. 157.

¶ See Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithras, p. 135.

astrologers placed Gemini with Virgo in the house of Mercury, the wandering god. And it will be recalled that Paul journeyed to Syracuse and beyond in a ship whose sign was Castor and Pollux, the Twins of the zodiac. In fact in classical times this constellation was often symbolized by two stars over a ship, placed there because the asterism was believed to be the guardian of mariners, protecting them in storms and other unfortunate occurrences. Macaulay writes:

> Safe comes the ship to Haven
> Through billows and through gales
> If once the great Twin Brethren
> Set shining on the sails.

Probably these stars had a wider field of usefulness as the protectors of travelers in general because they were originally associated with a propitious mythical journey. At any rate their position in the sequence of the Star of Bethlehem legend corresponds with the third episode, when "the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem...And they came with haste."

In Orion south of Gemini the popular tradition of Europe has located "the wise men from the East," who in Matthew's version came to Jerusalem "Saying, where is He that is born King of the Jews, for we saw his star in the east and are come to worship him." This tradition has identified these wise men with the Magi or kings, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, meaning Splendor, Light of Moloch, and Baal Protect the King, and it has placed the Magi in the three stars of Orion's Belt where they also journey from the east towards the cradle of the new born child.

Proceeding in our sequence, we come now to the constellation Cancer, known to the Chaldeans, and in the Platonist philosophy, as the Gate of Men through which souls descend from heaven into human bodies. It was also known as the Dark Sign, black and without eyes, because of the dearth of bright stars within its confines. Within this constellation and exactly at the point which, by its passage over the meridian at midnight, marked the moment of the winter solstice and the birth of the sun god, is found a nebula dimly visible to the naked eye, called from pre-Christian times Praesepe, the Manger or Crib, the birthplace of Jove. Aratos, the poet-astronomer, who wrote about 270 B. C., and Eratosthenes, his contemporary, called it Phatne, with the same meaning. Aratos writes:

> And watch the Manger like a little mist
> Far north in Cancer's territory, it floats,
> Its confines are two faintly glimmering stars,
> One on the north, the other on the south,
> These are two asses that the Manger parts.
>
> .....

In later times Ptolemy repeated this name as Phatnes. The Arabians called it the stall, the Copts, Ermelia, the Nurturing, and the Egyptians, The Resting Place. Close behind it and equidistant from it north and south the two stars Gamma and Delta were called the Asses by the Greeks, Latins, and Arabs. In Matthew's version of the Bethlehem Legend, this asterism corresponds in position with the arrival of the wise men at the Manger of Christ. "And, lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And they came into the house and saw the young child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped him; and opening their treasures they offered unto him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."

In Luke's account the shepherds "found both Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in the manger."

Popularly Praesepe has long been recognized as the Manger of the Infant Jesus and the Aselli or the two stars of the Asses, as the ass and the ox standing beside it. One may see them so figured in the paintings of Botticelli, Gentile de Fabriano and other painters of the early Italian school. (Fig. 6). The dark stable corresponds with Cance

Fig. 6. Nativity. Gentile de Fabriano.

as the dark sign. So here we may add the fourth correspondence in the sequence between the zodiacal signs and the accounts of Matthew and Luke. Two more zodiacal constellations still remain between Cancer and the eastern horizon, the Lion and the Virgin. We have found stellar analogues for all the persons and animals associated with the Nativity except Joseph and Mary. It may at least be worthy of notice that Joseph is of the tribe of Judah and that Judah's symbol was a lion, associated with the Lion of the zodiac.

We come now to a very remarkable phenomenon. Almost exactly at midnight at the date assigned to the birth of Christ anyone who watched the eastern horizon would observe rising there the brilliant first magnitude star Spica, the Sheaf of Wheat, the brightest star of the Virgin. As previously stated this constellation has been widely depicted from prehistoric times as the Mother Goddess holding in her arms the infant deity.

So the Bethlehem legend begins with Aries on the western horizon follows back through the zodiacal signs in the order of the cosmic procession and is completed by the rising of Spica in the east having thus referred to all the zodiacal signs visible at midnight on December 25 and to no others.* But this is not all. After the wise men had worshipped at the manger it is said of them: "And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way." They had come from the east. If they departed into the west their movements corresponded perfectly with those of the stars rising in the east and setting in the west. Next we are told of Joseph: "And he arose and took the young child and his mother by night and departed into Egypt;" that is, they departed towards the southwest, the direction of Egypt from Palestine, as did the setting zodiacal stars by night. And then Herod "slew all the male children that were in Bethlehem, and in the borders thereof from two years old and under." Dupuis has suggested that this slaying of the first born may probably be interpreted as the increasing light of the dawn putting out the light of the stars. So in the Mithraic symbolism. the passage of the sun through the constellation Taurus is represented by the sun god in the act of slaying a bull, and in the labors of Hercules the killing of the Nemean lion is known to represent the solar passage through Leo and the killing of the Lernean Hydra the passage through Cancer. So in Egypt, Horus killing the Hippopotamus represents the light of the rising sun destroying the light of the circumpolar stars.† Thus in contemporaneous symbolism we know that slaying was used as a symbol of the sunlight that causes the stars to disappear.

In our sequence this episode corresponds with the coming of the dawn after the setting or departure of Cancer, the birth sign. It may or may not be significant that the sign rising in the east just before dawn is Sagittarius, the Bowman or Archer, the early war god, slayer of many, who is opposed in celestial position to the stars of birth. It is of course possible to carry an analogy too far, but this would account for Herod, the only personage of importance in the legend not already

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* Orion merely represents Gemini.

† Lockyer, Dawn of Astronomy, p. 152.

associated with some asterism. But when Herod was dead the Holy Family returned to Palestine; that is when Sagittarius set the constellations Cancer, Leo, and Virgo reappeared in the sky. This ends the chapter. Dupuis, however, adds that under the Virgin's feet is the dragon of the Hesperides, our constellation of the Serpent, which rises after her and seems to pursue her, as in the Apocalypse. So, too, it aims at her heel and almost touches it with its open mouth.*

We may regard this series of sequential correspondences between the aspect of the zodiac and the Bethlehem legends as pure coincidence; otherwise, however we interpret the significance of the legends, we must recognize that they are a symbolic description of the heavens at the moment of birth. But those who recognize the continued evolution and refinement of the methods of determining a date will now realize that just as Denderah refined all the primitive methods of determining a sacred date by furnishing an actual picture of the sky for the contemplation of the priest-astronomers, so Bethlehem has refined upon that method again by substituting for the material sky picture a poetic mental picture which, once fixed in the memory of the observer, would indicate to him, without recourse to planisphere or cameo, when the moment of the solar birth had arrived. In practical utility, in intellectual refinement, in poetic beauty of imagery this method of determining a date is beyond comparison the noblest of all. The priests watched the progress of the celestial procession night by night until Aries, the Ram, appeared at the eastern horizon directly after sunset, Aries, the leader ram, who led forward his starry flock across the sky. This was the signal that the solstice was approaching and with it the joyous moment of the birth of the new year's sun. That night they eagerly noted the advance of the stars and there came to them indeed, as they watched, the vision of the celestial host chanting the song of eternal harmony in accord with the music of the spheres. Then they beheld the Magi rising in the east and hastening towards the birth place of the celestial deity whose coming they themselves had prophesied. "And an angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid." Who indeed can stand under the majesty of the starry heavens and watch the eternal procession of the celestial lights without being awed by a sense of communion with eternity and infinity? And so the celestial journey continued until Aries approached the western horizon and Praesepe, the Manger, reached the meridian overhead. The moment of moments was near at hand and all eyes were now fastened upon the eastern horizon for the final announcement in the heavens. At length it came. At midnight and from the line of the horizon flashed the bright rays of the

* Bunsen, Angel Messiah, p. 26.

rising star Spica. They saw the celestial Virgin holding the infant sun and then they turned to give the glad tidings to the waiting people. The sun of the new year was born and was returning to them bringing again the season of warmth and life. Hence it was by night and not by day that they celebrated the rebirth of the sun.

But though Aries was the constellation of the shepherds, it was the astronomers themselves who as shepherds watched by night the wanderings of their starry flocks across the fields of the sky. Is there in poetry a more beautiful simile? As one writer states it, "The imagination of the Chaldeao-Babylonians, as of the western Asiatic peoples in general, saw in the stars a vast flock scattered over the celestial spaces and each orb which appeared to lead the course of a cluster of other stars was a lulim or chief, for this expression pertaining to pastoral life, finally became a poetic way of designating a chief or king."* So in the early Euphratean astronomy the Milky Way was known as the River of the Shepherd's Hut and the heavens as the Shepherd's Tel or Mound. The shepherd was the sun god Dumuzi, the Son of Life.† The star Arcturus, opposite Aries in the sky, was also known as the Shepherd of the Heavenly Flock, and Orion was the shepherd, Keeper of the flock of stars," and the "Shepherd Spirit of heaven."‡ Bethlehem itself was a place of pasture where David first sang as he watched his father's sheep. Higgins in his Anakalypsis has shown that in the literature of that period the names of actual places on earth were used of ideal and celestial regions. On the Euphratean stellar tablets the name of the city of Eridu is applied to an asterism.¶ It was customary for the shepherds to keep watches of three hours each by turns to preserve the sheep from beasts of prey and from bandits, and these watches provide another simile for the watches of the astronomers. And so the shepherds of Luke's account are one with the wise men, the Magi, the priest-astronomers of Matthew, who foretold the Nativity by watching the stars. These astronomers were indeed in the old days the leaders, princes, and kings of the people in matters both intellectual and spiritual. The Egyptians called them the mystery teachers of the heavens and in the Book of the Dead, better called the Book of the Master of the Secret House, and other sacred writings, nearly every religious idea was conveyed by some astronomical analogue.‖

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* Cuneiform Inscrip. of West. Asia, Vol. II, pl. 31, l. 41, d. e.

† R. Brown, Jr., The Milky Way in Academy, Vol. 41, p. 43.

‡ Olcott, Star Lore of All Ages, p. 278.

¶ R. Brown, Jr., Euphratean Stellar Researches, p. 24.

‖ W. M. Adams, Book of the Master of the Secret House, p. 22.

According to Dupuis the Magi were priests of Zoroaster and worshippers of Mithras, and the gold, frankincense and myrrh which they offered at the Manger were the three materials usually offered to the sun by the Arabs, Chaldeans and other Oriental peoples. In the early art of the Roman catacombs they almost always wear the Mithraic or Phrygian cap. At least the Magi were known as observers of the sun and stars who would be employed appropriately enough in watching for the solstice. And so the stable of birth with the animals around it is the simile of the night sky and of the zodiac, the zone of celestial animals. The "house" mentioned by Matthew is probably the solstice in which the sun rests.

To return to the taxing mentioned by Luke for which Joseph and Mary went up to Bethlehem, it seems that this was an enrolling or noting down of the population rather than an actual taxing. So the astronomers noted down mentally the stars as the luminaries entered within their field of vision and passed on to assume each its proper position in the solstitial heavens. The literal interpreters are again in trouble here, for it has been pointed out that a census would have been impossible in winter, as the whole population could not then have been put in motion, yet only in winter could field labor have been suspended.* Baron von Oefele has shown that a list of the positions of the planets from 17 B. C. to 10 A. D., lately discovered in Egypt, gives a number of details that correspond with those set down in the second chapter of Matthew, also that the Greek word ἔστη, translated "stood" in that chapter and referring to the star which "stood over where the young child was" is itself a translation of a technical term used by the Egyptian astronomers to describe one asterism in conjunction with another.† More specifically it seems to have been used to represent the position of a planet when its apparent direct motion ceases and its retrograde motion is about to begin or vice versa. The similarity of the position with that of the sun at the solstice is evident, for then the solar southward motion ceases and the northward begins, or the reverse. Moreover the very name solstice refers to the standing of the sun. So though Baron Oefele thinks that the conjunction referred to was that of the two planets, we may suspect that it was the conjunction of some asterism with the solstitial point on the meridian. If we are right we may reasonably ask which seems more probable, that this technical, scientific expression was used in a literal account written for the supposedly unscientific early Christians, or that it is evidence of an account written by astronomers for astronomers, as the interpretation in this article implies?

* Catholic Encyclopedia, "Christmas."

† Mittelungen der Voederasiatischen Gesellschaft. 8 Jahrgang, 2d Pamphlet, pp. 40, 41.

But what then was the Star of Bethlehem? In the light of these facts this star was nothing more than an asterism which annually marked for the astronomers the approach of the solstice. It may have been Praesepe itself, but as that group is inconspicuous and difficult to observe, it seems more probable that it was some bright star near it. If so the star Pollux in the Twins seems best to fulfill the required conditions because it is the nearest bright star to the solstitial point and is slightly in advance of it in the celestial procession. We have seen this star and Castor used for this very purpose on the Mithraic cameo. Let us note that the star is not mentioned in Luke's account where it would have to follow the shepherds of Aries and the angelic host of Taurus, thus disturbing the sequence of the story. Matthew's account begins with the wise men of Orion under Gemini and in this episode the star first appears in the proper sequence if Pollux is intended. The astronomers watching for the coming of the solstice would first see this star rising "in the East" as did the wise men. They would then search diligently over the celestial fields of Bethlehem for the approach of the celestial Manger to the solstitial meridian. "And, lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was." That is, Pollux moved westward before their watching eyes until it stood upon the meridian overhead and then and there announced the immediate coming of the solstice. This is no supernatural event but a cosmic poem reverently related in simple and unmistakable language, clothed in noble and beautiful imagery and resonant with the eternal harmony of the spheres. Nor should we forget that in this cosmic harmony the sky, the stars and the sun itself sang for those who listened, the motif repeating and repeating that like the sun the human soul journeys across the skies of life to set indeed but only to rise again and again triumphant over darkness and the grave. The astronomic is not the ultimate symbolism of the story; there is a triple meaning; first the literal, second the astronomical symbolism, and third the mystic and spiritual symbolism. The first two meanings seemed to have served the last.

At the end of the eighteenth century Dupuis called attention to the correspondence between the legend of the Star of Bethlehem and the position of the Manger and of the Virgin and Child in the sky of the Nativity. More recently von Bunsen has been sufficiently impressed by this analogy to identify the Star with the Virgo asterism* and another writer placed the Star in the constellation of Orion. From the author's standpoint these writers only were following the right trail.

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* C. F. Dupuis, Origine de Tous les Cultes, Paris, 1835-6 Vol. VIII, 691 et seq.; Abridged Eng. version, Origin of Religious Worship, ch. IX; E. von Bunsen, Die Plejarden und der Thierkreis.

To some this symbolic interpretation may seem fanciful. It is certainly foreign to our habit of thought. Modern science has tended towards intolerance of knowledge not in direct and literal form. The mythical and symbolic has come to be regarded as valueless or absurd except as a psychological study of the aberrations of the pre-scientific mind. As a result, not only the poetic beauty of truth clothed in this garb has lacked appreciation, but we tend to regard as fanciful any consistent interpretation of Oriental imagery because our attitude towards it is, though perhaps unconsciously, more or less contemptuous. At least it will be admitted that the Bethlehem legend is primarily stellar and associated with the heavens, and that such legends in the Orient are typically surrounded with luxuriant symbolism. However this is not proof that any particular interpretation is correct. But this interpretation is consistent with Oriental thought; the incidents of the legend cover the whole of the visible zodiac at the time of the solstice; they begin where the visible zodiac begins and end where it ends; and, most important of all, they are found in correct sequence throughout. Surely it is highly improbable that either chance or imagination can construct such a sequence. Again this interpretation relieves us from the difficulties of the literal version, such as the shepherds tending their flocks in the winter, the wrong date of the taxing, and the failure of Josephus and Philo, as contemporary historians, to make any mention of such an important event, as the slaying of the first born. It has the advantage even over the "unusual" versions of not requiring us to torture any date into accord with phenomena. Another point may be added in its favor; it is not unique. Contemporary birth stories of other deities can be similarly interpreted, and likewise the important celestial phenomena associated with them as we have seen.

If we grant then that this interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem is correct, how does that effect the tenets of Christianity? Dupuis would tell us that it adds proof of the mythical basis of the entire New Testament narrative.* The higher critics on the other hand would probably hold that this is but another example of the adoption and use by Christianity of an earlier pagan legend, or better that it is a refined and beautified composite of the numerous older pagan legends of divine births harmonized with the astronomical conditions which, in part, at least, were attached to them also. It is well known that the Church from the earliest times has accepted and modified pagan rites and ceremonies in order to accelerate its progress along the lines of least

* Archbishop Whateley has ridiculed this view in a clever skit intended to prove that Napoleon is purely a solar myth, but his cleverness cannot overcome the fact that solar myths are numerous and have played a most important role in all the older religions. Moreover the student will perceive the difference between his argument and that of Dupuis without difficulty. See Richard Whateley, Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte.

resistance. In the Christian catacombs at Rome, for example, Christ is figured as Orpheus charming the animals with his lyre and as a youthful Latin shepherd.* These critics would add that the legends of of the birth of the solar god were surrounded with a sacred and reverential character which was very useful to the early propagandists of Christianity. And again they would point to the inevitable growth of myth and legend around every great historical personage. Baron Ernest von Bunsen would probably present a third view—that the birth of the Angel Messiah upon earth was divinely ordained to accord with the solar celestial birth so that the "cosmical was regarded as a symbol of the ethical; the sun as the symbol of divine light."† From this it will be seen that if we accept the symbolic interpretation offered in this article, we may still view the legend from the standpoint of the sceptic, of liberal religion, or of orthodoxy. It may refer to an actual historical personage or, like the Egyptian book of the Dead, it may offer an ideal and symbolic description of the spiritually perfected human soul written by masters of spiritual law. If the latter view be true, the remarkable analogies of the other birth stories would suggest that this is the masterpiece of a series of such ideals. But whatever view we accept let us repeat that it is the ethical and spiritual teachings of the Master that are important, not the incidents of the story, and these teachings are in no manner injured or impeded by this interpretation of the legend. We shall only have lost a wonder tale and in its place we shall have found a song of cosmic harmony, the worthy product of the highest form of human imagination.

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* See Lanciani, Pagan and Christian Rome, pp. 23, 347 et seq.

† Angel Messiah, p. 24.

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